Terrorism as Psychological Warfare

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"Terrorism" is linked to "terror" which is a state of mind, created by a level of fear that so agitates body and mind that those struck by it are not capable of making an objective assessment of risks anymore. Fear is a powerful tool in politics. Demagogues have at times conjured up the fear of an impending threat from across the borders to rally the populace behind them. The second use of fear in politics is more direct: despots and demagogues decide to apply the fear directly on the populace or sections thereof in order to terrorize them into obedience and submission.[2] "The purpose of terrorism is to produce terror," Lenin, a practitioner of the second method, once said dryly. The use of intimidation is not the monopoly of the state. Organized crime uses it too, but it does so discriminately. Terrorists use it more often indiscriminately and at random against a target group. Hence the enhanced fear they manage to generate among a much wider audience. The extreme fear caused by exemplary acts of violence against some members of a target group often stands in no proportion to the actual harm done. Those individuals experiencing acute terror are either paralyzed by extreme fear (immobilized) or panic from such fear (mobilized)—reactions which in both cases make rational thinking difficult.

The degree to which an individual or group is struck by terror depends, *inter alia*, on

a) the source of terror;

b) the likelihood that a terror-inducing event is going to occur again;

c) the object of primary victimization (e.g. a member of one's family, one's group) and one's relationship to it;

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d) the phasing of the terror-producing event (single-phase incident like a massacre or a dual phase incident like a hostage-taking where the outcome is open-ended but likely to be dreadful);

e) one's (in-)ability to avoid, prevent and combat situations which are terror-prone in the future.

V. I. Lenin's statement that the purpose of terrorism is to produce terror, requires modification. It produces terror among many of those who are close to the victims, believe that they might be the next target of the terrorists or those who, for other reasons, identify with the victim (e.g. former hostages whose original fear is reactivated by a terrorist incident that has similar characteristics as the one they were involved in). Yet *identification with the victim* of a terrorist incident is only one of several possible reactions. Some near or distant witnesses of a terrorist victimization *identify with the aggressor* rather than the victim because the act of terrorism is seen by them as an act of revenge, or as an act of justified rebellion by a revolutionary avant-garde keen to bring about a revolution or expel an enemy from its territory. A terrorist act might be seen by a sympathetic participant or onlooker as contributing to an end which this witness himself considers desirable. Some onlookers might not approve of the act of terrorism as the preferred method of conflict-waging, but they do approve of the motives, the rebellious spirit or the goals of the perpetrators. Alternatively, the onlooker might be *indifferent* to a given act of terrorism because he or she is not identifying positively with either side ("let them kill each other"). Various audiences tend to give different interpretations to terrorist acts. They are viewed as heroic by some and as cowardly by others. Actually, there are many audiences to a campaign of terrorism:

Table 1: Ten Terrorist Audiences.

1.	The adversary/-ies of the terrorist organization (usually a government);
2.	The constituency/ society of the adversary/-ies;
3.	The targeted direct victims and their families and friends;
4.	Others who have reason to fear that they might be the next targets;
5.	"Neutral" distant publics;
6.	The supporting constituency of the terrorist organization;
7.	Potential sympathetic sectors of domestic and foreign (diaspora) publics;
8.	Other terrorist groups rivaling for prominence;
9.	The terrorist and his organization;
10.	… and last but not least: the media.

Terrorism has been defined in many ways but the oldest definition, an ancient Chinese saying, encapsulates the central idea "Kill one, [to] frighten ten thousand." What distinguishes a criminal terrorist act of violence from a merely criminal act of violence is that the direct victim is generally not the ultimate target of the violence. The victimization serves, as it were, as an amplifier to convey

a message. To quote Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Una-bomber, a Harvard-educated American terrorist: "In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we' [ha]ve had to kill people."[3]

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were meant to impress several target audiences. According to a treatise titled "The Reality of the New Crusade," they were meant to "to inflame the hearts of Muslims against America," in the hope of "inspiring thousands of others to this type of operation."[4] Terrorism, then, must also—and in many cases primarily—be seen as a form of violent communication.[5] An example of this communication function (which is linked to intimidation) is a statement broadcasted by Al Jazeera in early October 2002 in which Aiman Al Zawahiri (No. 2 in Al-Qaeda) said, referring to the attack on German tourists in front of the Jewish Synagogue in Djerba, Tunis, and to the attack on the French oil tanker Limburg off the coast of Yemen: "The Mujahedeen youth has sent one message to Germany and another to France. Should the dose [of the message, AS] not have been sufficient, we are ready—of course with the help of Allah—to increase the dose."[6]

When we try to evaluate the terrorist menace, we not only have to look at terrorism's potential for intimidation and its instrumentalization for coercive blackmail, we also have to look at the mobilization bold acts of terrorism can potentially produce in groups vulnerable to the terrorist temptation. The third dimension of non-state terrorism—to impress target audiences, not necessarily linked to the victims—is one that reflects the original 19th century rationale for acts of terrorism by non-state actors—the idea of "propaganda of the deed." Peter Kropotkin, one of the 19th century anarchist theorists, admitted that a few kilos of dynamite could not demolish the historical structures created over thousands of years. Yet, *as propaganda*, terrorism could be effective. "By actions which compel general attention," Kropotkin held, "the new idea seeps into people's minds and wins converts. One such act may, in a few days, make more propaganda than a thousand pamphlets. Above all, it awakens the spirit of revolt…." [7] This lesson was not lost on subsequent generations of anarchists and terrorists. In an age where mass communication technology allows "newsworthy" events to be broadcasted worldwide in almost real-time, this communicative dimension of certain types of acts of violence has become an even more powerful rationale for terrorists.

Demonstrative, brazen acts of violence are often produced primarily to gain entry into a news system that often goes by the law that "good news is bad news and bad news is good news and no news is bad news." The immediate victims serve primarily as message generators. The specific identity of the individual victims are often immaterial to the perpetrators since the effect on third parties is what matters. In this sense a terrorist murder is often de-individuated, distinguishing it from a classical assassination where the victim is also the primary target. The way the news system "picks up," disseminates, and sometimes provides saturation coverage to certain acts of

violence enters the terrorist calculus and co-determines the strategy of many terrorist groups.

The communication purpose of terrorism has been caught in the academic consensus definition developed by Schmid (1988) on the basis of 50 expert responses to questionnaires:

"Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassination—the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a *target of terror*, a *target of demands*, or a *target of attention*, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought."[8]

Martha Crenshaw, one of the most seminal authors in the field, concluded, in a study on the causes of terrorism, that "The most basic reason for terrorism is to gain recognition or attention…."[9] More recently, L. Weinberg and A. Pedahzur have made another attempt to arrive at an academic consensus definition, basing themselves on 73 definitions gained from academic journals on terrorism. They came up with this "minimalist" definition: "Terrorism is a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role."[10]

The way these consensus definitions were reached was by looking at the building blocks—the fundamental component elements—of many existing definitions and establishing common elements. A similar approach is to look at the key elements of terrorist incidents. I would submit that many of the following key elements can be found in most "terrorist" incidents:

Table 2: Key Characteristic Elements of Terrorist Incidents.

1.	The demonstrative use of violence against human beings;
2.	The threat of (further) violence;
3.	The deliberate production of terror/fear/dread/anxiety in a target group;
4.	The frequent targeting of civilians, non-combatants, and innocents;
5.	The purpose of intimidation, coercion, and/or propaganda;
6.	The fact that it is a method, tactic, or strategy of conflict waging;
7.	The importance of communicating the act(s) of violence to a larger audience;
8.	The illegal, criminal, and immoral nature of the act(s) of violence;
9.	The predominantly political character of the act;
10.	Its use as a tool of psychological warfare.

Staging an act of terrorism is sometimes meant as an act of revenge and sometimes serves the purpose of provocation—in either case the monopoly of violence of the state is challenged. The terrorist rarely confronts the state directly

but prefers to demonstrate to the citizens the state's impotence of protecting them all the time. Acting from a clandestine underground at a moment of their own choosing, the terrorists manage to establish, for a few minutes—longer in the case of kidnappings and hostage taking—a superiority over the mighty state. This temporary presence of the terrorist then perpetuates itself through media coverage, rumors, and speculation and gains a longevity it could not generate by itself. Unlike the guerrilla the terrorist does not occupy territory on the ground. However, if engaging in a well-orchestrated campaign of intermittent attacks, he might succeed in occupying the minds of targeted groups by creating a climate of fear, thereby manipulating target audiences at the emotional level. To the extent that these audiences are not direct witnesses of the terrorist deed, "[t]he success of a terrorist operation depends almost entirely on the amount of publicity it receives," as Walter Laqueur once put it. If audiences are the target, the terrorists are the star performers and the public space where they create a violent reality becomes the stage of their theater from which they impress and shock the public.

Some terrorists have been quite explicit about their use of the media, as the following statement from a former terrorist active in the German Red Army and the Italian Red Brigades makes clear:

"We give the media what they need: newsworthy events. They cover us, explain our causes and this, unknowingly, legitimates us…. You must understand: the media are very interested in our actions. They look for contacts with us, they try to get information from us and they are eager to report everything we do and say…. Take for example the news agencies—within half an hour after calling them and briefing them, which we did quite often, you are in the headlines all over the world…. All you need is one phone call, a threat or a declaration…. Those [terrorist organizations] I know managed to establish contact and close contact with selected journalists. And the activity is often planned with the media as central factor. Some actions are planned for the media…."[11]

The importance of the media in this can also be seen from some of Bin Laden' statements. In May 1996, before engaging in major attacks, he remarked "God willing, you will see our work on the news."[12] In a video-taped conversation with like-minded people, he commented on the impression the kamikaze terrorists made on the world: "Those young men … said in deeds, in New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed other speeches made everywhere else in the world. These speeches are understood by both Arabs and non-Arabs—even Chinese."[13] And in analogy to some 19th century anarchist and social-revolutionary adherents of the theory of "propaganda by the deed," Bin Laden held that "The effect of his deed [of one of the 9/11 kamikaze pilots] was significantly more efficient than many million books, which have been written for the strengthening of Islam."[14]

There are many definitions of propaganda[15] but most of them refer to verbal or visual persuasive information strategies only, rather than stressing a broader set of "psychological activities in peace or war, directed at the enemy,

friendly and neutral audiences in order to influence attitudes and behavior affecting the achievement of political and military objectives"—what one terms as "psychological warfare."[16]

Violence and propaganda have much in common. Violence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism can be seen as a combination of the two. Eugen Hadamovsky, already noted in 1933 in his book on "Propaganda and National Power" that "Propaganda and violence are never contradictions. Use of violence can be part of propaganda."[17] Terrorism, by using violence against one victim, seeks to coerce and persuade others. The immediate victim is merely instrumental and serves to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience.[18]

What are some of the effects that can be achieved by the terrorist "propaganda of the deed"? By tailoring their violence to some of the news values of the media ("If it bleeds, it leads"), terrorists can gain, as we already noted, access to mass audiences.

Table 3: Ten Elements Determining "News Value".

1. Immediacy and event-orientation;
2. Drama and Conflict;
3. Negativity (bad news has drama and conflict);
4. Human interest;
5. Photograph ability;
6. Simple story lines;
7. Topicality (current news frames);
8. Exclusivity;
9. Status of information source.
10. Local interest

Source: Based on M. Peltu. The role of communication media. In: H. Otway & M. Peltu (Eds.) *Regulating industrial risks: Science, hazards and public protection.* London-Butterworth, 1985, 128-148; cit. in: Bernhard Debatin. "Plane Wreck with Spectators": Terrorism and Media Attention. In: Bradley S. Greenberg (Ed.). *Communication and terrorism. Public and media responses to 9/11.* Cresskill, N.J: Hamilton Press, 2002 168.

The media not only transmit their message—a deed that speaks for itself or a communiqué to go with it—almost in real-time. They also publicize the terrorist's cause free of charge which makes their strategy very cost-effective. Empirical research has shown that a number of goals are pursued in this way:

Table 4: Terrorist Goals associated with Publicity for their Violent Deeds.

1. Winning or enlarging sympathy among "their" public
2. Winning new recruits for terrorist organization
3. Demoralizing targeted sectors of the public
4. Demonstrating the vulnerability of authorities
5. Polarizing the political situation.

Source: adapted from Robin P.J. M. Gerrits. Terrorists´ Perspectives: Memoirs, in: David L. Paletz and Alex P. Schmid. *Terrorism and the media. How researcher, terrorists, government, press, public, victims view and use the media.* Newbury Park: Sage 1992, 33.

The media have become a weapon of mass communication in political conflicts and even more so in armed conflicts. Already Josef Goebbels noted in 1942 that "News is a weapon of war. Its purpose is to wage war and not to give out information." Each side in a conflict wishes to give a certain media "spin" to events, so that they are interpreted favorably for one side or another. However, terrorists go beyond what generals of conventional armies and guerrilla leaders do. They are primarily interested in the psychological rather than the physical effects of their violence, based on "Their conviction that the actual effect of terror is its representation in the media, without which its value and effect as a weapon is meaningless and limited"—to quote the director of Israeli Television, David Witzhum.[19] Terrorists try to influence not only the size of the media coverage but also its spin and direction by clever timing and symbolic targeting. The effectiveness of a terrorist act is determined by a number of factors, including the degree of publicity obtained, the degree to which demands are met by the adversary, the degree of support generated from the terrorist's existing or envisaged constituency, the amount of disruption and damage inflicted, and—last but not least—the amount of panic and terror created in the target group.

ELEMENTS FOR A COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGY

If terrorists are, as Karl Marx once put it, "dangerous dreamers of the absolute," we need to know more about their dreams and about how to bring them back to reality by trying to change their mental framework. The fact that an act of terrorism is not just an act of violence but foremost an act of communication, requires that appropriate communication strategies are developed to "soften up" the terrorists and their constituencies. At the same time it is imperative to strengthen the resilience of the victims and targets of terrorism to reduce their fear.[20] If we only see the violence of terrorism and not its hidden communicative goal, we miss the central point of terrorists' strategy, namely—in the words of Boaz Ganor—that

> " … terrorism is a form of psychological warfare against the public morale, whereby terrorist organizations, through indiscriminate attacks, attempt to change the political agenda of the targeted population. (…) By convincing the target population that terrorist attacks can be stopped only by appeasement of the terrorist organizations, the terrorists hope to win concessions to their demands. The greatest danger presented by terrorism is thus not necessarily the direct physical damage that it inflicts, but the impact on the way policymakers feel, think, and respond."[21]

If terrorism is a form of psychological warfare, we should be focusing as much if not more on countering the propaganda as we focus on preventing and controlling terrorist violence. Ultimately, the fight against terrorism can only be won if we manage to prevent young people from joining such organizations,

if we manage to induce members of terrorist groups to leave their organizations and if we can make it clear to their leaders that their strategy is not leading to the intended results. Terrorists and their sympathizers issue communiqués and copious writings to explain and "justify" their deeds and win new adherents. This mixture of ideology, propaganda, and half-truths goes all too often unanswered and is dismissed out of hand. That is a mistake. We should consider countering every terrorist propaganda statement with well-argued counter-statements, directed not necessarily at the terrorists themselves but at their constituency and, above all, at those who are vulnerable to the terrorist temptation. The language of hate and violence needs to be answered by the language of reason and humanity—and deeds that match our words.

I have incorporated some of these elements in the following ten rules for preventing and combating terrorism.

TEN RULES FOR PREVENTING AND COMBATING TERRORISM

1. Prevent radical individuals and groups from becoming terrorist extremists, by confronting them with a mix of "carrot and stick"—tactics_and search for effective counter-motivation measures.
2. Stimulate and encourage defection and conversion of free and imprisoned terrorists and find ways to alienate the terrorist organization from its constituency.
3. Maintain the moral high-ground in the struggle with terrorists by defending and strengthening the rule of law, good governance, democracy and social justice.
4. Try to address the underlying conflict issues exploited by the terrorists and work toward a peaceful solution while not making any substantive concession to the terrorists themselves.
5. Establish an Early Detection and Early Warning system against terrorism and other violent crimes on the interface between organized crime and political conflict.
6. Deny terrorists access to arms, explosives, travel and identification documents, safe communication, safe travel and sanctuaries; disrupt their preparations and operations through infiltration, communication intercept, espionage and by limiting their criminal- and fund-raising potential.
7. Reduce low-risk/high-gain opportunities for terrorists to strike by enhancing transportation and communication security and by hardening critical infrastructures and potential sites where mass casualties could occur.

8. Prepare for crisis—and consequence-management for both "regular" and "catastrophic" acts of terrorism in coordinated simulation exercises and educate the public to cope with terrorism.

9. Enhance technical assistance against terrorism by strengthening the capacity of law enforcement, intelligence, and the military of states which lack sufficient capacities while also enhancing internal and external coordination within and between states to deal more effectively with terrorist threats.

10. Last but not least: counter the ideologies, propaganda and indoctrination of secular and non-secular terrorists and try to get the upper hand in the war of ideas – the battle for the hearts and minds of those the terrorists claim to speak and fight for.

NOTES

1. The views and opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent official positions of the United Nations where the author works as a Senior Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer at the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna, Austria.

2. Cf. Corey Robin. *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Email: alexander. schmid@unode.org

3. New York Times, June 1995; cit. Thomas J. Badley. Defining International Terrorism: A Pragmatic Approach. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1011 Spring 1998, 98.

4. Cit. "Coordinateur du mardi saint," Ramzi Ben Al-Shaiba promettait "un millier d'autres operations de ce type" '*Le Monde16 September 2001, p.2*. F. Halliday observed in a similar vein: "11 September did not, nor was it designed to, destroy America as a power so much as to mobilize support against its Middle Eastern allies."—F. Halliday (2002) *Two Hours that Shook the World. September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences*. London: Saqi Books.

5. For an interpretation of terrorism along these lines, see: A.P. Schmid. & Janny de Graaf (1982) *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

6. – Cit. *Der Spiegel*, 43: 21 October 2002, 21.

7. Peter Kropotkin. The Spirit of Revolt. Cit. Ze'ev Iviansky Individual terror: Concept and typology. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, 1977, 45.

8. Alex P. Schmid. (1988) *Political Terrorism*, Amsterdam, North-Holland Publ. Company, 28.

9. M . Crenshaw. The Causes of Terrorism. *Comparative Politics, July 1981, p. 386*.

10. Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur. The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism. Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Panel Empirical Analyses of Terrorism. Philadelphia, August 27–31, 2003, pp. 10–11. The journals surveyed were *Terrorism* (Crane Russak & Co., 1978–1991), Terrorism (Minneapolis, MN: John Scherer, 1982–82, 1986–1989), *Terrorism and Political Violence* (1990–2001), and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1992–2002). – A short definition along these lines was already suggested by Edward S. Herman in 1986:" Terrorism may … be defined by the use of

violence in conjunction with a search for media publicity". – Edward S. Heyman. Power and the Semantics of Terrorism. In: Ellen Ray and William H. Schaap (Eds.). (2003) *Covert Action: The Roots of Terrorism*. New York: Ocean Press, 44.

11. Cit. Gabriel Weimann & Conrad Winn. (1994). *The Theater of Terror. Mass Media and International Terrorism*. White Plains: Longman. 61.

12. Cit. M.E., Bowman. Some-time, Part-time and One-Time terrorism. Repr. From *INTELLIGENCER*, *Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*, Winter/Spring 2003, Vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 16.

13. Quote from the translated transcript of a videotape; cit. B.L. Nacos. Mass-Mediated Terrorism. The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publ., 2003, p.41.

14. Quote from 62 minutes propaganda video produced by Al Qaida's propaganda committee as quoted in *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 44, 27 October 2003, 122–123.

15. See, for instance, Ute Daniel, Wolfram Siemann, 'Historische Dimensionen der Propaganda, in: U. Daniel, W. Siemann (Eds.), *Propaganda. Meinungskampf, Verführung und politische Sinnstiftung (1789 – 1989)*. Mit Beiträgen von Sabine R. Arnold, Zygmunt Baumann, Ute Daniel, Günther Heydemann, Peter Jungblut, Gerd Krumeich, Felix Moeller, Paul Nolte, Wolfgang Piereth und Wolfram Siemann (Frankfurt a. M. August 1994) 12.

16. Philip M. Taylor (1999). *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy*. Edinburgh University Press. In: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/book-pt2.htm; Oct. 1st, 2003.

17. Cit. Hannah Arendt. (1971) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971, 341.

18. Peter Kropotkin. *The Spirit of Revolt*; cit. Ze'ev Iviansky Individual terror: Concept and typology. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, 1977, 45.

19. David Witzhum, op. cit., 33.

20. Ronald D. Crelinsten and Alex P. Schmid. Western Responses to Terrorism: A Twenty-Five Year Balance Sheet. In: Alex P. Schmid (Eds.). Western Responses to Terrorism. Special issue of *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 4: 4 Winter 1992, 322–323.

21. Boaz Ganor. Israel's Counter-Terrorism Policy: Efficacy Versus Liberal-Democratic Values, 1983–1999. Unpubl. ms., 1.